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DEPARTMENT FOR EAP/MLS(EMERY);
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TAGS: [LA](#) [PHUM](#) [PREF](#) [PREL](#) [SOCI](#) [TH](#)
SUBJECT: FIRST DIPLOMATIC ACCESS TO HMONG RECENTLY
REPATRIATED FROM THAILAND

Classified By: AMBASSADOR RAVIC R. HUSO for reasons 1.5(b) and (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: Pressure from the U.S. and like-minded members of the international community on the GOL to allow independent access to Hmong repatriated from Thailand has finally resulted in a significant step forward. On December 10, the MFA arranged for the Ambassador and other diplomats and representatives of UN agencies to visit two sites: a resettlement village established by the GOL at Phalak that is home to recent returnees, and a second community at Phathao established in 1994 with international assistance. Although our sessions with the returnees were in the form of "town hall" meetings, we were permitted to ask probing questions and direct them to whoever we chose. The overall impression of the participants was that the inhabitants showed no sign of intimidation or mistreatment and that living conditions were generally as good as, if not better, than those in other small rural villages. Two of the individuals we met were from among the group of eight leaders of the camp in Petchabun who were deported by the Thai in June following the demonstrations there. Many families in Phalak had cell phones and were able to contact relatives in Thailand and abroad. End Summary.

Trip Overview

12. (SBU) Lao Ministry of Foreign Affairs Press Department Director General Yong Chanthalangsy - the Lao senior official charged with directly managing the Hmong repatriation issue - on December 10 arranged for Vientiane- and Bangkok-based diplomats, representatives of international organizations, and local media to visit two Hmong villages in northern Vientiane Province. Journalists from the Thai paper, the Nation, and from RFA, VOA and AFP were invited but decided not to attend, citing the need to cover political events in Thailand.

13. (C) The delegation included the Ambassador and PolOff, the European Union Charge d'Affaires, diplomats from the Australian, German, French, and Thai Embassies, and representatives from the UN Resident Representative's Office and the UNICEF Office in Vientiane. The presence of the head of the UNHCR regional office and an official from the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in Bangkok was significant. The Lao relationship with UNHCR had been very strained in recent years, although relations with IOM have been correct. The fact they were included suggests that the Lao authorities are now prepared to engage once again with these organizations whose mandates relate directly to the treatment of the Hmong returnees.

¶4. (U) In addition to DG Yong, the Lao were represented by MFA Chief of Cabinet Mr. Yaseng (no last name) - himself a Hmong - and MFA Europe and Americas Department Director General Ambassador Khouanta Phalivong and several members of the MFA Press Department.

PHALAK

¶5. (U) The group traveled by a Lao military Mi-17 helicopter first to Phalak village, in Kasi District. Construction of Phalak as a resettlement village for Hmong repatriated from the Huay Nam Khao camp in Thailand's Petchabun Province began in May 2007. We were greeted, in typical Lao fashion, by a receiving line of community leaders and escorted to a community center for a town hall- style meeting. The meeting began with the usual recitation, by the Lao official in charge of the district, of facts and figures regarding the community, including details of the population,s makeup, village infrastructure, government services, and agricultural statistics.

¶6. (U) According to the official,s report, the resettlement village now has a population of 462 living in 76 households. The total number of houses, however, is 100 so there is room for additional families. The village is 28 kilometers west of Kasi City in northern Vientiane Province and accessible by road. The GOL said it provided each returnee household with shelter, agricultural tools, farm land (including irrigated paddy land), as well as rice, canned food and free electricity for one year. The GOL has also built a water

supply system, a medical clinic, and an elementary school through grade four which now has 203 students. Local officials estimated total spending on roads, houses, community buildings, and water/sanitation, electrical, and irrigation systems to be in excess of USD two million so far.

They said they had plans to increase the irrigated land area to allow the village to expand to 150 households and become self-sufficient in rice by 2010.

(NOTE: the GOL is also building a second new resettlement center at Khamkeut Village in eastern Bolikhamsai Province which has sufficient arable land for 300 families; 46 have so far been resettled at Khamkeut.)

¶7. (C) During the ensuing group meeting, we were given the opportunity to ask questions of the roughly 60 participants, most of whom were middle-aged male heads of families but also including several women and younger men. A few members of the group, (notably the Ambassador, UNHCR Rep and Poloff) speak Lao and could confirm that the translations of the questions and the returnees, answers were accurate and complete. Not unexpectedly, several of those who replied to questions appeared to have had some coaching, particularly those who prefaced their answers with expressions of thanks to the Lao government for providing them shelter and livelihoods. However, everyone who spoke addressed the questions fully, and there were no apparent indications of fear or distrust. Most of the returnees raised practical issues regarding living conditions and the need for continued short-term assistance.

¶8. (C) A few of the questions led to revealing answers. Asked whether the returnees had cell phones, a flurry of hands went up and - after a brief discussion - the villagers said there were 44. They said they had to walk several kilometers to get a signal but did so regularly. The local officials said they planned to install a tower in 2009 to bring the signal into the community. In an aside, DG Yong stated that it was government policy to allow the returnees to have access to cell phones so they could report back to their relatives in Thailand and the U.S. on their conditions.

Another question related to freedom of movement and whether outside visitors were allowed. One individual stood up to identify himself as a visitor from another province. Others said they had and could travel to the district towns for business or personal reasons. There was some ambiguity,

however, regarding whether the Lao officials required prior notification. Our impression was that there was such a requirement.

¶9. (C) DG Yong made certain that we were introduced to two recent arrivals in Phalak, Phiya Lee and Sai Thoua Yang, who were among the eight leaders of the Huay Nam Khao camp who were deported involuntarily by the Thai following the demonstrations and burning of the camp in June 2008. Human Rights Watch (HRW) issued a statement in October raising questions regarding their whereabouts and treatment. (Prior to the HRW release, a Lao official had informed the Embassy in confidence that all the leaders were safe and in good health.) According to DG Yong, these two leaders had not been jailed in southern Laos (as reported by HRW) but had been detained at the returnee processing center in Phaksane District of Laos' Bolikhamsai Province. This detention lasted until their families were returned to Laos in November. Phiya Lee and Sai Thoua Yang and their families reached Phalak Village on November 27. The key elements of this version of events were confirmed by the two leaders but we did not have the opportunity to speak to them alone. Neither showed any signs of being under stress and both seemed at ease with DG Yong whom they clearly knew well. DG Yong also had one of the family heads show off his recent appendectomy scar, presumably to demonstrate that the returnees had access to hospital care.

¶10. (C) During the question and answer session, Sai Thoua Yang was asked about the reasons why Lao Hmong had gone to the Huay Nam Khao camp and why many were now choosing to return. His reply was quite probably rehearsed with the Lao but, nonetheless, seemed credible. He said Lao Hmong began leaving for Thailand immediately after the U.S. resettled an earlier group of 15,000 Hmong from Wat Tham Krabok in 2004-05. He said the Hmong went there in the belief they would also be admitted to the U.S. for resettlement. Instead they wound up in lengthy detention at the Huay Nam Khao site.

He added that those who have returned to Laos are satisfied with their living conditions and treatment. One of the woman leaders in the audience noted that when she was in Huay Nam Khao, she and others were told about the GOL policy of clemency toward returnees who would be provided with shelter and farmland after their return. This, she said, had turned out to be true. Asked why the others at Huay Nam Khao are still unwilling to return to Laos, one of the returnees said they had been told they would be killed by Lao officials if they returned and some still believed this may be true. He then wryly remarked that he was clearly alive and happy not to have been killed.

¶11. (C) Repeating information that we had received before, but new to some of the group, DG Yong provided more detail on Lao policy and treatment of returnees. He stated that of the approximately 1900 Hmong who have returned from Thailand, all but those at Phalak and a few at Khamkheut had been returned to their communities of origin. During the group session, he said that the returnees at Phalak were there because they had either sold their property before leaving for Thailand, or were engaged in slash-and-burn agriculture and had no villages to which to return. Later, in a private conversation with the Ambassador and the UNHCR rep, he was more forthcoming. He said that about half of the Phalak residents were from an insurgent group led by Blia Shoua Her (now in a detention facility in Nong Khai, Thailand) who had operated to the east of Phalak before leaving for Thailand. These Hmong had gone directly from the jungle to Thailand and had not been previously integrated into Lao communities. DG Yong also identified Blia Shoua Her's group as responsible for attacks in the area of Vang Vieng that continued through 2006, including one that led to the deaths of two Swiss tourists in 2003. The Embassy cannot confirm this accusation. However, if the Lao government believes this is true, the fact they have been willing to assist in the resettlement of members of the Blia Shoua Her group is a positive signal for other "jungle" Hmong.

¶12. (U) The visit to Phalak ended with a tour of the school. The head of the school and all the teachers were Hmong but were not from among the returnees. The students included children from nearby villages who were not ethnic Hmong. We were able to talk directly to the students, all of whom spoke Lao and/or Thai. The age disparities in the classroom were significant; fourth graders were as young as 8/9 and as old as 12/13. The older ones all said they were returnees and had not been regularly schooled in Thailand. The younger ones were from neighboring villages.

PHATHAO

¶13. (C) The group traveled next to Phathao village, 10 kilometers north of Vang Vieng town in northern Vientiane Province. A community of returnees from Thailand first set up in 1994 with international assistance, Phatao appeared prosperous and had good infrastructure, including irrigation. The point of the visit was essentially to show the foreign diplomats the progress that had been made over the years in integrating the returnees and creating conditions for them to earn their livings. During the town hall meeting, we asked whether there were any families or individuals from the community who were now, or had been, in Huay Nam Khao. The villagers said that four families had been among those returned recently by the Thai authorities, and an additional four families had returned on their own. They admitted there were other families who remained in Thailand but were reluctant to specify how many. The villagers burst out in laughter when asked why these people had gone to Thailand, some for a second time, and a chorus of voices replied, "To go to a third country." The question, "What third country?" provoked more hilarity, and the response, "The U.S."

COMMENT

¶14. (C) The visit represents a positive step by the Lao authorities towards transparency regarding the welfare and treatment of Hmong returnees. Although we had no opportunity to engage privately with returnees, we did have enough latitude to ask open-ended questions and gauge the reaction. The overall impression of the participants, who met for an

after-action review of the trip, was that the returnees were not under duress. All agreed that while it was important to encourage any positive moves the Lao make towards giving the international community access to returnees, it was also imperative to continue to press for direct international involvement in assisting returnees and their communities.

¶15. (C) In this regard, the inclusion of UNHCR and IOM is significant and may indicate a cautious willingness on the part of the GOL to allow these agencies a role. The IOM is represented here in Laos and is quietly discussing with both the Thai and Lao authorities options that would allow them to verify whether repatriations are truly voluntary and to provide some forms of on-going assistance once returnees reach Laos. The Lao appear to be seriously considering an IOM program -- if it is couched as a program to assist returned migrants in general and not just Hmong. We will continue to work with our like-minded counterparts to press the Lao to accept international assistance and involvement from whatever source they find acceptable.

¶16. (C) An immediate result of the visit has been a thaw in relations between the Lao and UNHCR. The current UNHCR representative is a fluent Thai and Lao speaker with long experience with Southeast Asia refugee protection issues. On the trip, he established a positive relationship with DG Yong. Soon after, DG Yong told us he will arrange for the UNHCR to visit privately the other six Hmong protest leaders. Yong described this as a "confidence building measure." END COMMENT.

¶17. (C) Bio Notes: DG Yong has proven to be a savvy practitioner of strategic communications. He also has been

a reliable and accurate source of information on the Hmong. Unfortunately, he will move to a new assignment in January as the Lao Ambassador in Geneva. He was chosen for the position to better engage with the UN agencies involved in human rights and refugee issues. His successor will be the current Lao Ambassador to Australia, Khenthong Nouanthasinh. Ambassador Khenthong has had previous postings in New York and as the MFA Deputy Director General for the Europe and Americas Department.

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